

Slag hikes state pollution rating

HELENA (AP) — The amount of toxic chemicals produced by Montana industries in 1992 increased to 43.8 million pounds, mostly because of greater slag production at an East Helena lead smelter, a federal report says.

Released Tuesday by the Environmental Protection Agency, the annual report showed Montana ranked 23rd among the states in toxic byproducts. The year before, Montana was 25th, and 40.8 million pounds of toxic chemicals were released in the state.

The top 10 polluters in the state,

in order, were ASARCO Inc., East Helena; Stone Container Corp., Missoula; Exxon Refinery, Billings; Columbia Falls Aluminum; Holly Sugar Corp., Sidney; Cenex Refinery, Laurel; Conoco Refinery, Billings; Plum Creek Manufacturing, Columbia Falls; Louisiana-Pacific Corp., Missoula; and Rhone-Poulenc Basic Chemicals, Rocker.

The list was the same in 1991, although the rankings varied.

The most common chemicals released in Montana are zinc, lead, manganese, copper and methanol.

Chemicals released into the air

reached 2.6 million pounds, or about 6 percent of the total. About 140,000 pounds were released into surface water. The rest were deposited on the land.

The report is based on an EPA survey of manufacturers. Nationally, industry released 3.2 billion pounds of toxic chemicals into the air, water or ground. That was 6½ percent less than in 1991.

In Montana, the ASARCO lead smelter maintained its ranking as the greatest producer of pollution in the form of slag. It accounted for all but 2.7 million pounds of the toxic chemicals released into the Montana environment in 1992, or 41 million pounds.

Bob Little, ASARCO's plant manager, said his company's ranking is misleading because the smelter's huge slag piles are not considered an environmental danger.

"The slag is chemically and physically similar to sand except for the minor amount of metals it contains and the (black) color," he said. "The metals are not readily available to the environment. They don't leach from the slag or become airborne easily."

Air pollution from the plant has decreased 64 percent since 1988 and the company plans to spend \$15 million over the next three years to further reduce emissions, Little said.

The Stone Container Corp. liner-

board mill near Missoula ranked second with 975,520 pounds of toxic chemicals released into the air and water.

The report showed 955,020 pounds of chemicals put into the air, more than twice the amount recorded in 1991.

Larry Weeks, technical director at the mill, said that big increase was caused by mistakes in calculating emissions before 1992. In earlier reports to the EPA, Stone Container failed to include methanol pollution from a vent that has been operating since the plant opened in 1957, he said.

"It was an oversight," Weeks said. "We were overlooking a major source of methanol."

He said pre-1992 reports to the EPA will have to be changed to reflect the additional source.

A prominent environmentalist criticized the EPA survey as inaccurate because it does not include toxic chemicals released by the mining industry.

Jim Jensen, executive director of the Montana Environmental Information Center, said mining operations do not have to participate in the annual study even though their waste rock and tailings ponds contain toxic metals.

He agreed with Little that the ASARCO slag pile poses no threat "as long as it stays where it is."